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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of middle and high school teachers and administrators about one unsuccessful professional development session. Participant interviews asked: What is a typical day like for you, from when you get up until when you retire? What are your memories of the presentation? Where do you think the hostility at the session came from? What does the professional developer need to know to understand what it is like to teach in your school/department/district? What are other professional development sessions like that you have attended? and How might professional development be structured to be most useful to you? Results highlighted five themes: a history of interpersonal conflict with other teachers; a historical belief that professional development is impractical; feeling overwhelmed by tasks teachers must complete; resentment about top-down decision making in the district; and anxiety about changes occurring in schools. Results were used to reshape the approach to professional development, with sessions only conducted in districts where teachers have real choices and can help guide the direction of professional development. Results provide evidence that conducting pre-workshop interviews with participants is an essential factor in improving the culture of workshops. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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ANOTHER DAMN THING WE'VE GOT TO DO:

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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New Orleans

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Running Head: TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ANOTHER DAMN THING WE'VE GOT TO DO:
TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you. I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible people. All people are invisible to one another. R.D. Laing, Politics of Experience.

Introduction

One hot October afternoon I walked into the Branchton School District Vocational Technical School to deliver a professional development workshop on the topic of Content Enhancement. The building was a mammoth, flat, brown structure, surrounded by a large, paved parking lot with less than ten percent of the parking spots taken. There was no grass or parkland, just pavement. The windows were drab and dusty. As I carried my materials for the training session into the school, I caught the distinct smell of gasoline floating from somewhere nearby.

Once inside the building, I detected the source of the gasoline aroma: a major section of the school was dedicated to a shop for training students, I assumed, in auto mechanics. Another section of the school was dedicated to a salon for training students to be beauticians. The salon also had its own distinct, pungent aroma.

The room for my professional development session was huge, perhaps five times larger than a regular classroom. The walls were concrete blocks painted off-white, except for a false wall made of fabricated paneling. The floor

was covered with large gray floor tiles, probably remnants from the K Mart days. About 65 student desks were arranged in rows pointed toward an overhead projector and a table where I was to stand while I gave my presentation. The desks filled up less than a third of the room.

It was hot in the room, about 85 degrees. The heat combined with the inescapable aroma of gasoline made the room quite stuffy. Two large, noisy fans stirred the air, but there appeared to be no ventilation for fresh air, and the building apparently wasn't air-conditioned. The heat and air were unpleasant for everyone in the room. Many fanned themselves with booklets before the session began. Most teachers seemed quite tired, many sighed, sat heavily in the student desks, and said little.

The session was to begin at 12:00, but everyone wasn't settled in until around 12:15. Since I had been doing professional development for many years, I quickly recognized several signs suggesting that some of the teachers may not have been enthusiastic about this opportunity for learning. Some teachers had taken out marking to do while I presented. Others talked with each other during my introduction to the group, given by Mr. Gilmore the head of the English Department. Still other teachers were passing notes to each other when I began, laughing quietly, but loudly enough to draw glaring looks from those who were interested in the topic. Many teachers listened silently, perhaps frowning, often sighing, some rolling their eyes or shaking their heads. I began my session by asking teachers to discuss what they thought might keep them from implementing the Concept Mastery Routine (Bulgren, Deshler, and Schumaker, 1993) I was describing. A heated discussion followed.

The teachers who had attended a previous summer workshop were very enthusiastic about the potential advantages of Content Enhancement. One teacher, who had directed the committee that brought me to Branchton, dominated discussion at times, and because so many other teachers seemed frustrated, I was happy to hear her comments. Others soon said they didn't see how Content Enhancement could help them in their classroom. Many teachers said that frankly they didn't like being taken away from their students for professional development. Some said they had no idea of the purpose of the session. Discussion then got more heated. Two teachers angrily argued about co-ordinating extracurricular tasks and school work. Some teachers shushed others, while others openly criticized peers for being rude. Teachers complained about such problems as standardized tests, time, jargon, lack of prior knowledge for the training, poor communication, class size, and a lack of motivation for change. Numerous unpleasant comments were made.

After teachers had expressed their views and the general hostility had dissipated somewhat, I explained that everyone was free to take or reject whatever they wished from the training and that those who wanted background training would get it. Further, I explained that future sessions were optional, and that those sessions would be tailored to what teachers said they needed. Fortunately, I had a humorous film to show. The teachers, strained from their discussion, laughed and relaxed during the film, and after a break we began discussion of The Concept Mastery Routine (1993). Teachers now were much more receptive. When I asked for written comments on the afternoon's activities, however, their frustration remained evident. A sampling of their written observations reveals the pervasiveness of their negative feelings:

...there is so much negativity it seems--just toward trying something new...

...I regret the less than warm reception you have received from our department. Education is in such a state of flux that we need to be tolerant of change. Clearly we have a problem there...

...the lack of communication ended up putting you in a sticky, hostile situation...

...there is no way you can convince all of us to do this...

...not all of us are feeling as bitchy as some of the others around us...

...the problem of education is too overwhelming, and we should all be put on retirement and get a new fresh group to learn the new way to teach the kinds of students that we get today. Anyone with any prior knowledge or experience is too set in their ways, old and jaded.

...I have a really bad headache and I have to have an ulcer test Monday

One teacher's comments about the session, reconstructed in the following vignette, convey the sentiments people held about the session:

Vignette: The October Session

I always find it embarrassing to be a part of that group. I think we treated you better. I think it was set up to fail because there was no real...maybe there was an attempt on various parts to communicate, but communication was not clear ... what our goals were and what we were doing there. I don't think anyone had a clear purpose in being there, but that kind of meeting where people are angry is pretty typical of many of our meetings. I usually go away with a stomach ache because I think there is a lot of disregard for the way people are and there's lack of respect for individual differences and just a lot of impracticality. I think for me

personally, I would have cut through the crap and got it done and that was not your problem, but I felt that you had to deal with the brunt of that and I was angry at the leadership for not being more assertive and knowing or making us know that these weren't your issues and what we were doing there...

Methodology

R.D. Laing's comments, cited above, are marvelously applicable to my experience of the October Session, and to the general experiences many professional developers have in schools. Too often we eagerly launch into a training session with little understanding of the specific contextual factors shaping the beliefs, sentiments and perceptions of each teacher involved. Traditional programmatic professional development simply does not allow time for us to gain a rich understanding of the groups with whom we will be working, so we base our presentation on assumptions that may be inaccurate (Beer, Eisenstat & Spector, 1990). If the people closest to us are unknowable, then large groups, to use Laing's term, must be invisible. Teachers, as a group, sit before us like an open book, but a book written in a language we do not understand.

I believe that there is substantial merit in trying to learn the language to read that book. Perhaps, if we better understand the contextual factors shaping professional development, we will become more effective professional developers. Certainly there is room for improving the traditional methods of professional development found in most schools. The research on professional development suggests that traditional efforts to teach innovations to teachers have little real impact on instruction (Fullan, 1991, 1993; Sarason, 1982).

This paper documents my attempt to learn the language necessary to read the contextual factors that shaped the October Session. After I read over the teacher comments about the session, I quickly realized how interesting this group would be to study in more detail. Although their level of frustration was high, their behavior at the start of my session was similar to what I had seen on other occasions when I had experienced traditional, professional development. Why do teachers behave like that, I wondered? I decided to try to answer that question using the tools of ethnography.

The purpose of the study I designed was to describe the contextual elements that affected teacher behavior at the October Session. I took on this study to answer the specific research question that arose from my experiences: "Why did the Branchton teachers act the way they did during the October professional development presentation?"

I interviewed 23 teachers and two administrators in an attempt to answer this question. I interviewed at least five teachers from each of the four schools that participated in the workshop, 11 teachers from the middle schools and 12 from the high schools. Of the teachers interviewed, 20 were female and teachers' ages ranged from 23 to approximately 60 years old. The department is made up of experienced teachers who have taught most of their life at this district. One teacher, for example, commented "Well I've only been here for 12 years; I haven't been here that long."

Interviews were approximately one hour long. Although they were open-ended, ethnographic interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1994) each interview eventually addressed six questions:

1. What is a typical day like for you, from when you get up until you go to bed?

2. What are your memories of the October, 1993, presentation?

3. Where do you think the hostility in this department comes from?

4. What do I need to know to understand what it is like to teach in your school, department, district?

5. Tell me about professional development sessions you've attended. What did you like? What didn't you like?

6. How might professional development be structured so that it could be most useful for you?

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The names of all participants and places were changed to protect the confidentiality of everyone involved with this project. After this, transcripts were entered into the software package Hyperqual2 for Qualitative Analysis and Theory Development (Padilla, 1993) for analysis. The notes of a research assistant who conducted ethnographic observations during the session were also entered into Hyperqual2. Following traditional qualitative analysis methodology (Spradley, 1980), I identified categories of meaning and subsequently identified cultural themes that spread across categories of meaning. In all, 28 categories were identified, and five cultural themes were discovered. These findings represent the major areas of discussion in this paper.

To enable readers to experience teachers' concerns written in teachers' voices, I have edited short vignettes from interview transcripts and included the vignettes as illustrations throughout this paper. Vignettes, as I use them in this paper, utilize words and phrases from interview transcripts. However, the

transcripts are edited for clarity and effect: thus interviewer comments are removed, the structure of comments may be rearranged, some redundancies may be eliminated, transitional words may be included, pronouns may be replaced with antecedents and so on.

Findings

Interviews, observations, and data analysis surfaced five themes as contextual factors inherent in teachers' experience of the October Session. Specifically, teachers during the session carried with them: (a) a history of interpersonal conflict with other teachers; (b) a historical belief that professional development is impractical; (c) a feeling of being overwhelmed by the tasks they need to complete as teachers; (d) resentment about the top-down decision-making in the district; and (e) anxiety about changes taking place in their schools. These themes are elaborated below:

"There's a Tug-of-War Personality". "I still see the tug-of-war personality between the high school level and once in a while in the middle school level."

Like any organization, the Branchton English Department has a variety of interpersonal and intraorganizational conflicts. These conflicts likely affected teacher behavior during the October session. The major organizational conflict is that, as one teacher said, "there is a division between middle and high school teachers." In each of the twenty-three interviews I completed, the interviewee discussed at some length the differences between middle school and high school teacher perceptions. There was unanimous agreement that that difference is a source of hostility in the Branchton English department. As one middle school teacher put it, "It's always up to the high school and down to the middle school, and I don't think it's because we're on the same road."

In part, the differences between middle and high school teachers arise because the middle and high schools have significantly different cultures. Middle school teachers work on instructional teams, collaborating with science, math, and social studies teachers teaching the same grade levels. Middle school teachers are also very concerned about student behavior in the school. Because their students' "hormones are raging," middle school teachers spend much of their energy simply controlling student behavior. Consequently, most middle school teachers see themselves as teaching the whole child first, teaching a specific curriculum second. One teacher's observations summarize this recurring theme in middle school teacher's comments:

> In middle school, because of our situation, we don't have as many big issues. Kids aren't working on high school credits to graduate and so on. There aren't as many classes offered. It's just sixth, seventh, eighth grade English, not comp. and lit. and all those different classes that high school has to deal with and there just aren't as many issues and it's tough enough working with this age group. I mean, I think we feel "you've got to band together and work together, or we'll never make it through this," because the kids can be so difficult. We're dealing more with behavior problems. In high school, it's not an issue because at 16, they're grown.

High school teachers did not collaborate on grade-level teams as middle school teachers did. In fact, many Branchton high school teachers are isolated from other English teachers by the location of their classroom. In the meetings I observed, high school teachers' actions reflected the common middle school teachers' observation that high school teachers place more emphasis on

curriculum: "they're always concerned about composition, poetry--we kind of tie everything together."

Many of the middle school teachers believed that the innate differences between middle and high school have led high school teachers to under appreciate what middle teachers do. "They don't do it maliciously," one teacher commented, "they don't mean to mistrust us." Yet each middle school teacher touched on this issue, summarized in the following teacher's comments:

> there's that feeling that if you go to the high school, you've gotten a promotion ... I even think that way sometimes. It's just as if it's harder at high school and "we're better than you guys."...We hear the standard joke about the teachers with ninth grade saying, "Didn't your eighth grade teachers teach you this?" and they blame us and we blame the elementary school and the elementary school blames the parents ... they look at us like we don't have the kids prepared for high school and there's that feeling ... that sense that they don't look at us as "real teachers," you know. We weren't good enough for the high school level.

The tug of war of personality that exists between middle school and high school extends into departmental meetings. One teacher summed up a general opinion when she commented that "English department meetings always have that atmosphere of hostility, [especially] when the entire district gets together." Many middle school teachers commented that they feel "left out" at departmental meetings since "we always talk about high school textbook adaptations." One middle school teacher observed that she and her middle school colleagues choose not to become involved, simply because most issues don't concern middle school:

> you've sat in on those meetings and you know how quiet we are. We just sit ... It's as though we simply do it without complaining very much ... I think many of us don't feel ... represented at all ... we sit there and we're just kind of disgruntled, you know, and we have these meetings and we're disgruntled and we have another meeting, and you know, the same feeling is very pervasive.

The middle school teachers are not alone in their concern with the "hostile" nature of professional meetings. Several high school teachers commented that they find the professional meetings to be very upsetting emotional ordeals. One teacher's comments are illustrative:

> ever since I've been here ... the first department meeting I ever went to, I was extremely uncomfortable. I thought, "These people don't like each other ... This is very uncomfortable." [Outside of the meetings] ...the people ... were very helpful to me ... nurturing and all of that, so it was a surprise to me. There was a meeting here in this building when [my friend and I] ... left it in tears and we were not even participating in the disagreements. It had nothing to do with us, but it was just such an unpleasant atmosphere that we just, we cried, both of us, and it was like "Why are we doing this?" They weren't even talking to us, about us or anything, but it was that unpleasant, and there have been times, it has been like that. A lot of times ...

This teacher's comments are echoed by several others who recalled leaving departmental meetings overcome with emotion. As this paper will show, there are several reasons for this "unpleasant atmosphere." However, one important factor that several teachers raised is that they feel silenced during

meetings because "there are certain people at high school who dominate." In professional meetings, teachers report, some teachers are listened to, and others are ignored. Teachers commented that they feel "intimidated," and as one person commented "until I get away from the feeling, I'm not going to open my mouth." Another teacher identified this as a major area for concern: "I think that there are times when some of the strong characters say or do things that intimidate and injure others, and they never realize it. They don't do it ... some of them don't do it on purpose; others definitely do it on purpose, I think, and to me, all it does is separate us."

One final tug-of-war personality exists on a micro level at individual schools. At the North Branchton High School, in particular, there are teachers who, for various reasons, do not get along well together. Some teachers are disappointed by how classes have been assigned, others are upset by the way teachers have been transferred from the high school to the middle school. Over time, resentment has built up about issues, and now some teachers choose not to speak to some of their colleagues.

Vignette: Micro-politics

> The other pproblem with Gwen is it's like the very next year after that, I had been teaching the enriched sophomore class for some period of time and had done extremely well with it, had been complimented by everyone possible: parents, administrators, whatever.
>
> Gwen, as a second year teacher or whatever at that point, was being asked to move one hour to middle school and went to the principal and said, "Since I have to move, don't you think it's only fair that I get my choice of what I teach when I'm here" and so he said, "Sure" and so she

took this class that I'd had. Well, the history in our department had been that if you had a class, you liked a class, you kept a class as long as you could keep the class and it worked out with the schedule. And so it was like "Gwen stole Cathy's class," and that's what everybody said, " and it didn't sit well with me, and I wasn't happy about it,, but that's the way education is, and I honestly did...I didn't like to moan and wail and carry a...I personally don't care for Gwen as a personal thing but certainly wasn't out seeking any revenge or anything, but then I started hearing from Joe that Gwen says that "Cathy says", or "Cathy is" or "Cathy did" and I said, "No, I'm not."

There was some kind of a to-do with Peggy... actually Eleanor had said something that was attributed to me that hadn't been me, but maybe was Peggy and when I said, "No, I didn't do that," Joe carried back to Gwen and Gwen said she did, and Gwen said, "Cathy's a liar," and when I was called a liar, I hit the ceiling, and so at that point, I confronted Gwen one morning and said, "You can say anything, but you will not call me a liar. Stay out of my life and my world. I want nothing to do with you." It was a big confrontation and since that point, I rarely speak to her and you know, I just really don't want anything to do with her, so I don't see that those fences will be mended.

Give Me Something That I Can Use. "Give me something that I can use that makes my life easier ... so I can survive this [teaching] easier, rather than waste my time with two hours of eyewash."

Teachers' comments on the history of professional development in the Branchton school district do not paint a pretty picture. Some described the past

professional development they have experienced as "totally futile," "worthless," "dog-and-pony-shows." For many Branchton teachers, professional development "is just one more of those damn things that I'm going to have to do."

In part, teachers resent professional development because it is offered in settings that are not learner friendly. I have already described the Vocational-technical setting, but perhaps another description is illustrative. In March of 1994 I was asked to speak to all of the teachers at Branchton South High School. The presentation was offered in a large cafeteria, large enough to provide meals to a student body of over 1200 students. Thus, when everyone sat down for the presentation, even though the entire group included fewer than 100 participants, some teachers sat more than 100 feet away from me when I presented. The room was flooded by natural light, which was impossible to block, so many teachers were unable to see the film and overheads that were integral parts of the presentation. Also, at times throughout the session, a loud jack-hammer sound emanated from a refrigeration unit adjacent to the cafeteria. Consequently, at various points it was simply impossible to hear anyone speak. Because of the many distractions and barriers to communication created by the setting, even the most attentive listener must have had a difficult time learning everything presented. Not surprisingly, during interviews, many Branchton teachers commented that they would prefer presentations given in more learner-friendly settings:

> I think it should be done by proctor and small group because when you get in a large group, you get some smart mouths that are sitting there writing letters to each other and not paying attention ... in the small group,

they are more comfortable about talking about ideas and how they can integrate things within the department ... they will become more dependent on one another for support and ideas; then it's just going to make life easier for everybody.

Another major criticism many teachers leveled against inservice was that its structure often inhibited mastery of the skills presented. Many teachers commented that they do not benefit from single, isolated sessions. One teacher nicely summarized this point of view: "When they are those one shot kinds of things, people ... feel like, why is my time being wasted; I should either be in the classroom, or I should have the opportunity to be doing my class preparation and paper work." Most agreed with this point of view, commenting that they felt their time could be much better spent on classroom tasks rather than one-shot training sessions.

Vignette: O.B.E. Presentation

We did one at South High School that was district-wide that was on a workshop day and it was on outcome-based education ... I think the assistant principal or assistant superintendent got fired for that one.

That was about the last straw. It was worthless. It was worthless. She came in, was introduced. I think she had slides or something. Actually, she was a classroom teacher that got a presentation together and went nationwide with it on outcome-based education...

We had handouts that were ... I went through the stuff and said, "What the heck is this?" It wasn't explained, it was all this terminology that ... was just incredible. You sat there and laughed and played tic-tac-

toe on the back of it. It was just incredible! It did not make sense at all and it was like making up words to try to sound pedantic.

And she got up there and talked about what she'd done in the classroom and how this had worked and how that had worked ... basically, what it seemed like was that they are sacrificing academics for eye wash. If we're going to have something on outcome-based education, we need to have a good presentation first of all, explaining what the heck it was, because I walked out of there, really, still not knowing what the concept of outcome-based education was ...

So it was something like, "Well, we need a speaker. Here she is. Okay. Fly her in. We'll do this. Fill the time with this." And it just seems like the presentation was not something we could take back and use.

If the district is wanting to do this, to help us improve, by God, bring in somebody that is going to help us. Don't just bring somebody that sounds good or that some principal has gone off on one of his little junkets someplace and thought she was cute and funny and bring her in and cram her down our throats.

Teachers also resented the approach taken by many presenters that had come to Branchton. Some commented that they were especially upset by outside "experts" who ignored teacher expertise or, worse, who sounded patronizing. One teacher articulated this point very effectively:

it's not like we are undergraduates. There are many people in our profession who are bright and who do read what's going on in the field, who do take classes on their own time, not because they have to, but

> because they love to teach. And I do think it's kind of demeaning [when a presenter appears not to] know about that.

Similarly, professional developers were criticized for their misunderstanding of the needs of the teachers with whom they were working. Teachers felt presenters should better understand the specific concerns faced by teachers. One middle school teacher nicely articulated this point:

> First of all, he's [the presenter] got to be on our grade level. We have in-service people that have never been in a middle school before. He can't relate to me and he can't give me information that is going to help my kids ... they need to be aware of the grade level and they need to give examples and information that relate and are for the middle school level; otherwise, I tend to turn off.

Branchton teachers were also critical of professional development that did not appear to address the practical issues arising in the classroom. While some teachers expressed interest in theoretical concerns, everyone expressed much more interest in professional development that had immediate practical applications. Branchton teachers wanted something they could use, that would help them reach more students, control behavior, or save time. "I want concrete ideas that help me motivate kids," said one high school teacher. Branchton teachers "have to see pretty immediate results" if they are going to accept a presentation.

Vignette: Learning Strategies Presentation

> She made so many of us so angry by her attitude probably as much as anything. We were doing it during ... you know, really, I don't know if

it was fall or spring, but the weather was extremely hot and we really didn't have any air conditioned anything in this building at that time. ...

It was at the end of the day when you're really tired. We weren't being paid for it at all. We'd be here until way after four and the building would be empty by the time, you know, we would finish. I'm not quite sure that people really function well if they're mentally and physically tired She may have had a much better audience if we had been rested...

She would come in and she would always talk about her experiences, her family, how all of this was very possible and how it would be very beneficial. She always looked so fresh, so clean... Red, perfectly styled hair, very attractive. She sparkled with jewelry. Diamonds. I've never seen any educator wear more diamonds than she did and it was tasteful. She looked good, and all of us felt absolutely so grubby, just really nasty ... we really weren't very receptive to her. I think we sat around looking like hostile juvenile delinquents. I'm sure we did. We were hostile, giving dirty looks, looking at each other and all of this hostile stuff. It's embarrassing to think about. A bit amusing, but mostly embarrassing ...

I think probably the thing that I didn't like, because I just don't believe it, I don't believe that there is any one system that is perfect, and this was virtually sold to us as being something that we had to do step-by-step, no deviation. There could be none of our personal input working with maybe an individual child. It was very cut, and very dried and it was nothing that you could deviate from. That irritated me. It was as if you absolutely had no brain and that you didn't know what might work

better using the same basic idea. There was no possibility at all. None what so ever. While I could see that strategies would be really very effective with some children, I knew that it wouldn't work with everybody. And could you change it? No, was the answer we got. You could not. This was it. It had been tested ... you could not change it and she was really quite adamant about that ... she didn't bend anything ... you had to follow those instructions exactly. It was probably a combination of many things.

At any rate, after she finished her stint here, I think that most of us tucked the books away that our district bought for us and just never used them...

Lots of Things to Do. "Lots of things to do. Lots of things that I know, well, if you're a good teacher, you can handle everything ... I think that's something that's been placed on us and I think that we believe that guilt stuff. Well, there's a lot of guilt."

As should be apparent from the data reported above, many teachers at Branchton feel "pretty stressed out." In part, that stress is increased by the heavy workload English teachers face. Most English teachers would agree that "English more than any of the other subjects requires more work grading." One teacher's comments illustrate the extent to which grading consumes English teachers' time:

I often get up and grade papers early in the morning. I grade papers at night. I teach English. I have a lot of papers and it is not always an A, B, or C paper. English is different and I have to take time to really read sometimes, so usually I'm up early and grading some papers.

"Up early" is quite early since classes start at 7:30 at high school and 8:10 at middle school. Although classes end early in the day, many teachers also attend meetings, or work on athletics, school newspapers, year books, or professional development. Many felt that they are drowned by the demands on their time. Planning time is seldom available for planning since teachers need to meet with other teachers, track down information on students, or talk with parents either on the phone or in person. The result is that teachers feel "overwhelmed." A new teacher stated that when she first started to teach, "I'd be exhausted every night when I started. I felt I had no life."

Vignette: There's Just No Let-Up

It's a lot of little things... I know when I go to planning period, I have in mind what I need to do: grade papers. I go to my office box and there are three forms to fill out, there is a survey I have to fill out, there are late papers I have to grade...which is part of English, so that's what we should do, but there are other just administrative type of things that we have to get done...or phone calls, that will take up my entire planning period and I don't get any of my school work done ... So obviously I have to take it home. I expect to do some of that but there's just no end to it.

And there are other things that we wind up with. We all have to share in duties, and I think that's all a part of school. We understand that. It's just, we have more behavior problems than we used to have, and that's very wearing to deal with that, and the office is over-stressed with the number of kids that they have to see. Oftentimes, you may have problems with a kid, you write them up, and the office can't see them until a week later, so that's kind of gone by the wayside, and they're just trouble—the

> noise level in the school is more, the problems in the hall are more, there's just no let-up. By the end of the day, you realize you're kind of let down, and you realize how tired you are because you've been on the defense all day long.

<u>You Have to Do What Ever the Head Honcho Says.</u> "You can't [keep the courses you want] because you have to do whatever the head honcho has told you to do."

Many Branchton teachers feel impotent in the face of external forces. In departmental meetings and interviews teachers repeatedly expressed the opinion that their ability to succeed as teachers was inhibited by pressures from the state, the district, and others outside the classroom.

The Branchton teachers' attitude to the standardized state-wide test that they must give to their students is illustrative of this phenomena. Each Branchton English teacher is required to give the test to his or her students and expected to teach content that will increase student performance on the test. During several professional meetings teachers commented that the test is not valid, that it will be soon be discarded by the state, and that teaching the test interferes with teaching the content that really matters. As one grade eight teacher commented, teachers do not completely reject the test, but they do not like feeling forced to teach content that does not pertain to their subject matter:

> We resent having to teach things that aren't what eighth graders need to be working on just so they'll do well on this test. And that's just teaching the test and we don't like that, but everything that applies to our curriculum, that's fine.

A greater source of frustration for Branchton teachers is the way financial issues have been handled within the District. Although a local levy has provided funds for the district to make structural improvements to the schools, there has been a decrease in funding for teachers' salaries, in part due to a loss of revenue from city sales tax. Over the past three years teachers' salaries have had only one 2% increase, and teachers' step increases have been frozen. Further, class sizes have increased and some smaller courses have been canceled. Financial concerns led the school board to eliminate one planning period from high school teachers' schedules one semester each year, and at the time this paper was being written, the school board appeared to be planning to eliminate a planning period from the second semester. All of these events increased teacher resentment even though many teachers recognize "it's nobody's fault." Other teachers blame the school board and administration for the financial crisis: "I firmly believe ... that they run this district as a business ... they are way top heavy on the rich end." One teacher's angry response to the board may not express a universal point of view, but many teachers share the anger she expresses about financially motivated changes:

> [I am angry about] the way they crammed the seven-period day down on us. We used to have six periods. The way they build up class size after they've lied to us saying it won't happen. I mean it's just been year after year, every year since, in the last twelve years, you're usable income is down.

The financial crisis is recognized as the main reason behind another source of resentment, the canceling of basic classes. Branchton high school teachers were, with a few exceptions, opposed to the elimination of basic classes, and

"fought it tooth and nail." After several meetings basic classes were extended for one year, but teacher concerns about student achievement remained:

> some of those little kids are going to be just so overpowered in a regular class that they are going to hide and give up and likely, emotionally, they are better off in the basic class than they are in a regular one. Yes, this is a decision that has been forced by the administration.

The elimination of basic classes, the increase in class sizes, the freezing of salaries, and the imposition of state wide testing are all events that create a pervasive belief among teachers that they have too little control over their classroom. Consequently, in interviews, discussions, and professional meetings, Branchton teachers often criticize the school board and administration together, referring simply to the district. Teachers often referred to the district and administration as "they," commenting that "they don't care about students;" "their priorities are in sports, not academics;" "they are getting rid of basic;" "they use to make us go [to professional development sessions] all day in August." Many teachers feel, as one succinctly put it, "We get a lot of things from above; this is what we resist."

Vignette: The District

> There is a lot of fear right now in Branchton because nobody's feelings are ever really considered, and so when something like [the October session] happens, all of a sudden, the feelings explode. I mean, you can only keep people bottled up for so long before they're going to explode whether it's the teacher that burned a classroom down ... or the teacher that went off with a gun.

Those didn't shock me. Neither one of them did because I've been under that stress. I don't think I'd ever break that far, but that is a lot of what you saw. People were just breaking. So many changes. People have been hurt. There's so much history. Teachers have been transferred over and above somebody else and found that it was unfair because they had 25 years in the district and another person only had 6, you know, and so this older teacher's transferred somewhere and so there's this ... the feelings come out and then there's the self preservation. I think we are all at a point where we're going to preserve ourselves, we're going to somehow find our own dignity because the district doesn't seem to give it to us, you know.

You don't go ask for help from the administration because you're not going to get it. The only place you are going to get it is somebody else that you teach with that can empathize with what you're doing.

A Community in Change. We are a community in change. I'm sure you've heard that. Our culture and numbers are vastly changing. We've had to deal with a lot.

Although the teaching professional within the Branchton English Department has not changed dramatically over the last 20 years (most of the 44 teachers have taught in Branchton more than 15 years). the make-up of the student body has. Many Branchton teachers are frustrated because the group of students they teach today is very different from the students they taught 10 or 15 years ago.

One major change teachers commented on was an increase in the percentage of minority students attending Branchton schools. Administrators

estimate that the percentage of minority students attending classes has gone from less than 5% to more than 18% of the total student population in the past 20 years. Several teachers commented that they are uncertain about their ability to provide appropriate, effective instruction to minority students. One middle school teacher talked openly about her feelings and fears:

> We have more new families coming in and again, quite a little variety which is good. I mean, I think it's good, but it's ... more challenging. It's something that the community has really had to really adjust to, good and bad. We've had to adjust to it. ... I have a lot of black students that use the word 'prejudice' whenever things are not right. And that's an excuse for them. I need some strategies to help me, maybe, with those situations. We need some cultural information to work with them, to make them feel more comfortable ...
>
> It's like, we're not valid; we're not...we can't be the teachers because we know we're not of their race and that kind of thing and I'm sure that maybe, that's what the white kids maybe feel. I don't know, but I really think that that's a real problem.

Many teachers expressed concern about significant changes in the role they must take as educators. In the past, Branchton teachers were expected to focus their efforts on providing for the academic needs of students. Now teachers' roles have expanded, and they are expected to fulfill several other responsibilities:

> teachers all come with the same concerns ... that we have so many responsibilities to these children besides teaching ... watching for drugs [and so on] ... it just reflects what's going on in society and it keeps

> getting more and more incredibly depraved ... we're all looking at what things were like when we grew up against now.

For many teachers, the students they work with present many new challenges. Although high achieving students often continue to be interested in English, a growing number of students shows no interest at all in their studies. Some students "don't care at all about grades," while others have "a lot of attendance problems." Many students are openly hostile to any figure of authority. The result is that teachers now expend as much or more energy on controlling behavior as they do on teaching content, and as this high school teacher's comments suggest, some students are finding innovative ways to be distracting:

> some days the kids are really down to earth and it's easy to get them ... get their attention and get them going. Other days they just squirm and squirm and squirm so it's a lot of fighting to get their attention and I have to fight for attention ... I've got a girl and a boy, and they'll sing all different kinds of things. I don't think either one of them are in choir, either. I keep trying to push them in that direction; of course, probably in there, they wouldn't sing.

A final change that affects many of the teachers in Branchton is a recognition that the district's reputation has decreased over the past 15 to 20 years. "Twenty years ago," one teacher observed, "Branchton was the prime choice for teachers." Another commented that in the past Branchton's reputation was so high that "when you were in a group, and you mentioned you were from Branchton, everyone in the room would turn to look at you." Over time, demographic changes in the community and financial restrictions on the district

have combined to erode some of the district's reputation. For the many teachers who have taught at Branchton their entire careers, this loss is particularly troubling.

Vignette: Change

As society has changed, the kids that society has produced have changed ...

Twenty years ago, I'll bet you, if there were any African-American students, there might be ... you could count them on one hand and now, we're probably 17 or 18%. ... twenty years ago, this was always I would say a working class community but upwardly mobile ... where education was up and coming, community life centered around the schools, and now ... the opportunity for growth no longer exists because we're land-locked ... and all of that new growth and excitement and all that dynamic feeling that comes with an area that's growing ... is developing out west.

So, yeah, the demographics, the number of youngsters that are on free or reduced lunch have greatly increased; the number of minorities that are representing our school district, greatly increased in the 20 years ... now we've got the kids of the nineties and they're different. The kids represent different cultures, they represent different points of view and this community is different than it was in 1972. a much higher percentage of kids come from homes that are fractured. Overall, K-12 in our school district, we're dealing with many more kids that are coming in damaged than we did 20 years ago.

How do you deal with these kids that are dealing with this and that and the other thing? How do you make those adjustments? I don't know

> ... Remember what I've shared: half of our teachers, if not more, have only taught here ... and so those strategies [teachers have used in the past] are successful with a lower percentage of kids than they were 15 years ago or 20 years ago ... so it becomes increasingly frustrating and I think some have been less able to bridge that chasm.

Analysis

Reading a social situation is similar to interpreting a text. Thus, in trying to understand the assumptions and phenomenology of my reading of the October Session, I turned to Iser's famous theory of aesthetic response (1978). The insights Iser brings to the phenomenology of reading literary texts, I believe, provides a methodology for interpreting the October session.

Iser uses R.D. Laing's quotation, cited at the start of this paper, to illustrate the central tenet of his theory of aesthetic response. Iser draws on Laing to assert that reading involves the mediation of places of indeterminacy; gaps, which separate the reader from the text. Each text is, Iser contends, invisible to us in the sense that Laing suggests, and reading is an act of filling the gap, bringing meaning to the experience of literature. In this way a reader transforms an ambiguous text into a living work of art. Like a photograph appearing in a developer's tray, meaning appears through the symbiotic interaction of reader and text.

Implicit in Iser's theory of aesthetic response is the belief that no one interpretation can be <u>the</u> definitive reading. By filling the gaps between a text's potential meaning and our own lack of understanding we come to an understanding, but the text always remains somewhat invisible.

I make the same claim for my reading of The October Session. By learning about the contextual forces that may have shaped teacher behavior during that session, I have gained a better understanding of that social situation, but, to be sure, aspects of the situation remain beyond my understanding. The reading I make is imperfect, as is any meaning constructed, but nevertheless it is a reading I can act on, an understanding that I can use.

When I re-read the events of the October Session, filled with knowledge of the cultural themes that surfaced through this study, the teachers' actions become significantly more explicable. Let's consider how each of the themes may have shaped the actions that took place at the session.

First, the elements of conflict that surfaced during interviews must have significantly affected teacher behaviors. Since the professional development sessions were originally designed for high school teachers, and middle school teachers were only asked to come after several high school teachers suggested that it would be valuable for them, no doubt many middle school teachers saw the October session as another example of high school setting the agenda for middle school. Indeed, Doug Gilmore even admitted that he could have done a better job of communicating rationales for the meeting to the middle school teachers.

By organizing a professional development session for the middle school teachers, the high school teachers may have also inadvertently reinforced the pervasive feeling that high school teachers under-value middle school teachers' pedagogical achievements. Furthermore, this session probably appeared like just another departmental meeting focusing on high school concerns; middle school teachers may have assumed it had little relevance for them.

I now understand that the meeting contained other dynamic and dysfunctional elements that arose during some professional meetings. The teacher who I thought spoke so persuasively in favor of my presentation was later identified by many as a dominant voice that silenced others. Simply because she spoke in favor of my presentation, other teachers may have chosen to resist it. Finally, the fact that some teachers had not spoken to each other for years for micro-political reasons represented a tacit barrier to my presentation. Indeed, when I re-read the presentation, I recognized that some people I grouped together for activities during the session, had informed me later that they always refuse to speak with each other.

Second, the history of professional development also must have shaped teacher behaviors during the session. Because Branchton teachers are accustomed to seeing one-shot presentations in unfriendly learning environments, it is only natural that they would expect the October session to be just another "worthless," "dog and pony show." No doubt many teachers expected something impractical and expected that there would be little or no follow up. Such low expectations are difficult to transcend with any afternoon talk.

I also, inadvertently, committed one of the sins middle school teachers identified by failing to demonstrate an understanding of middle school realities. Because all of my previous conversations about my topic had been with high school English teachers, I chose examples for my presentation from high school English. Ironically, I felt quite pleased that I had created several English examples for my presentation, never thinking that middle school teachers might feel "left out." Needless to say, when one teacher commented that presenters

"need to give examples and information that relate [to my grade level]...or I tend to turn off," her words had a particularly deep resonance for me.

Third, the low expectations for this session, the typically unfriendly atmosphere of the setting for the session, the apparent impracticality of the session for many, and so on, all probably intensified teachers' belief that the time given to this professional development could have been better spent. All teachers interviewed mentioned that they did not have enough time to complete all their tasks; consequently, for some, any afternoon professional development session would consume valuable time that they could better use "either in the classroom ... or doing class preparation."

Fourth, since many teachers had been told they must attend the October session, many must have felt that the session was just another example of the people in the "head shed," district administrators, pushing teachers around. Thus, for some, the session would have been associated with state-wide testing, the financial crunch, the closing of classes, and all the other externally imposed factors that inhibited teachers' freedom to act on their personal discretion.

Finally, my new awareness of teachers' concerns about their "community in change" surfaced an important window for communication that I overlooked when planning the presentation. Had I known that many Branchton teachers were intensely concerned about how to cope with the changes in their community and school, I could have designed a presentation that more specifically addressed their concerns. If I had spoken directly to their most pressing concerns, and offered a menu of possible solutions to those concerns, I suspect I would have increased the overall enthusiasm for the presentation and my project.

Postscript

My reading of the October Session has significantly shaped my approach to professional development, and I now only conduct sessions with districts where teachers have real choices and where they guide the direction of professional development. Additionally, my experience with professional development has shown that conducting pre-workshop interviews with participants is the single most important factor in improving the culture of workshops I conduct. By surfacing teachers' goals, obstacles, concerns and interests, I am able to create sessions that authentically respond to teacher issues. By making participants in sessions more visible, to borrow R.D. Laing's terminology, professional developers can improve the outcomes of professional development sessions, and ensure that sessions like the October Session are much less likely to occur.

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